



PROTECTING THE WORLD'S FIREFIGHTERS

The History of Bristol Uniforms 1801 - 2014

The History of Bristol Uniforms

It all started back in 1801 and involves the story of four entrepreneurial families who, over a period of 200 years, were to build a small clothing business into one of the 21st century's leading designers and manufacturers of protective clothing for firefighters in over 110 countries of the world.

Three centuries and four families

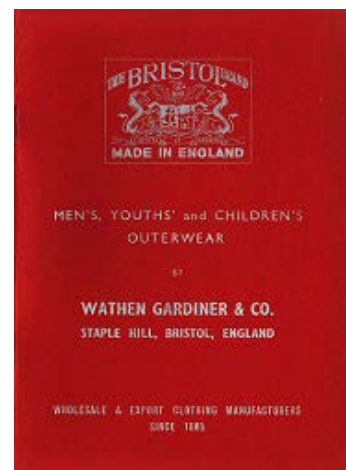
The four families most closely involved in the growth of the company to date have been the Gardiners, Wathens, Hills and Dorrells whose involvement in shaping the company has spanned the period from 1801 until the present day.

In the early 19th century Bristol had a thriving clothing industry based around the woollen mills of Gloucestershire and one small retail clothier, John Gardiner, one-time Postmaster and High Sheriff of Bristol, set up the business in 1801 which, by 1810, was located in premises in Union Street.

Most of the company's history between the 1830's and the end of the century is characterised by the growth founded on the development of a lucrative export trade – first with the West Indies in the early 1830s and later with Australasia from 1854.

The West Indies trade was the start of an export trade in ready-made clothing shipped across the Atlantic in large barrels known as 'puncheons' which were ideally suited to being filled with rum. This began many years' highly profitable (but presumably illicit) trade with the colonies.

In the early 1850s, John Gardiner's son, Henry Gardiner, succeeded his father as head of the business. He not only saw the huge benefits of colonial trade but substantial new opportunities in Australasia to which clothing was also exported. At this time, the business was generating rapidly expanding revenues and profits. Henry's two brothers, James and Charles, were also involved in the business during the 1850s and 1860s.



During the middle of the 19th century the expanding business moved first to premises in Maryleport Churchyard and then to 38 Broad Street next to Bristol Guildhall. A history of Bristol at the turn of the 19th century provides us with a colourful description of the business activities at the time;



'At Broad Street there were great underground storerooms containing 'saxonys, cheviots, worsteds, serges, vicunas, meltons, pilots, naps, friezes, flannels, drills, ducks, moles and cottons' of every type. The cloth was despatched to various cutting rooms and each garment was rolled into a bundle with the various trimmings and sent off to the various employees, some being factory-hands and others outside workers. Some concentrated solely on trousers, others were responsible only for coats. After this the results were despatched to the pressing tables, operated by women. Coat collars were blocked (pressed by hand) by men. The garments were packed in tin-lined cases for shipping in a room which was formerly the County Court.

The beginnings of the firm Wathen Gardiner, which existed until the mid-1990s, are set in the early 1860s when Sir Charles Wathen joined the firm in 1862 in partnership with Henry Gardiner. Sir Charles effectively took control and steered the growth of the company for the next 25 years until his death in 1887. He vigorously pursued the export markets of the world in the vast British Empire basing the success of the business on providing consistently high quality clothing from the Bristol factory. He is reputed to have bought wool landed from ships from Australia and New Zealand early in the morning and have turned this into sales of ready-to-wear clothing by the end of the same day!

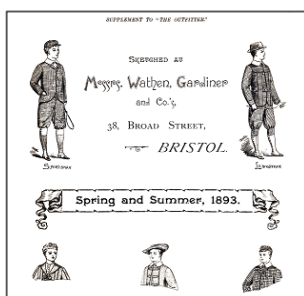


SIR CHARLES WATHEN.

Knighted by Queen Victoria for services to the public, Sir Charles was also mayor of Bristol on six separate occasions.

Bristol Uniforms still has at its current premises the safe which was originally made for Gardiner & Sons when it moved into newly built premises in All Saints Avenue, Bristol in 1874 – a building that was pulled down for redevelopment in 1962.

The third family in the history of the company came onto the scene on the death of Sir Charles Wathen in 1887 when William J Hill, who had been in partnership with Sir Charles, took over the business.



The advertisement (right) dates back to the 1890s and shows 'a bevy of smartly-dressed men and boys standing by the statue of Queen Victoria (erected 1887) on College Green'.



The picture (left) is an advertisement for boys clothing dating from 1893.

In 1899 the freehold and leasehold properties in Broad Street were sold at auction. The company moved out of the city to a new factory built on a greenfield site at Staple Hill which was at that time a semi-rural environment surrounded by fields.



The early 20th century

At the turn of the century Lewis joined W J Hill to head up the business, and, when Lewis left in 1910, W J Hill was joined by H R Smith in the controlling partnership.

A disastrous fire in 1910 (right) reduced the factory to rubble and the owners had to find temporary accommodation from which to continue their business until the factory was finally rebuilt on the site in 1917. In 1912, records show the company had 54 employees and, by 1925, this had grown to 66.



Between the two world wars – corporate clothing makes its mark



By 1921 a considerable volume of clothing business was being done in South America and South Africa, in particular sales of overcoats, but this incurred substantial bad debts and saw the beginnings of a difficult financial period for the company.

An agreement dated November 1925 (picture left) was drawn up between Wathen Gardiner & Co and a Mr A E Stafford of Capetown for the sale of clothing to customers in South Africa on a commission basis for which the representative would be paid 5% of the net value of sales made (less charges for cases). The terms of the agreement include one which states "all the accounts which are opened to be approved by Wathen Gardiner & Co and the execution of all orders to be subject to their decision".

In the early 1930s the business was being run by the partnership of Smith and Hill but by 1935, with the recession looming, the business was starting to struggle. Pat Hill, W J Hill's son, was learning his commercial trade in London working for Selfridges between 1932 and 1935 and was brought into the company in 1935 to learn purchasing and sales. Stuart Smith, who had been unsuccessfully heading up sales of civilian clothing in the pre-war years was bought out before the war began. By this time Wathen Gardiner was being run by a partnership which included William Hill, Pat Hill and Mr Harding and which continued throughout the war years.

By the mid-1930s a new business had emerged with the design and sale of civilian uniforms to both public and private sectors. Customers during this period included the Board of Trade, water companies, bus operators and mental hospitals, as well as Customs & Excise for whom Wathen Gardiner began the supply of uniforms in 1932. In 1937 tunics for the air force were made for the first time. Pat Hill was called up in August 1939 and spent six years on active service abroad, mainly in the Middle East, returning to the UK in late 1945 to rejoin the business. He was officially demobbed in January 1946.



After World War 2 (1940 – 1960)

At the end of the war the company gradually reverted to its pre-war civilian clothing activities whilst maintaining some links with the military. Employee clothing once again became the mainstay of the company's business and during the next 10 years there was a large expansion in the design and supply of today's equivalent of corporate wear. Increased competition came from a number of larger businesses making serge uniforms for both the public and private sector markets.

From the outbreak of war in 1939 until the mid-1950s the company sold its products across the world through a network of agents who were paid on commission which ranged from 5-7½%. Pat Hill became the senior partner in 1954 at which time the company was employing around 200 people.

The beginnings of specialised firefighter PPE (1960-1990)

When William Hill retired in 1964, Wathen Gardiner became a limited company at the same time as Harding was bought out by Pat Hill. Bristol Uniforms was created as a partner within Wathen Gardiner and began trading separately in 1965.



The mid 1960s was a period of major change. Continuing links with the military bore fruit when permanent firefighters were recruited to handle emergencies at RAF airfields and the company was asked to develop suitable protective clothing. This saw the introduction of the first aluminised suits, which were loosely designed around the buoyancy suits developed by the company for pilots during the war, and created export opportunities as well as UK business.

On the civilian side, a new factory was opened in Calne, Wiltshire, which employed some 50-60 people to meet the growing demand for casual trousers now being sold through major retailers who purchased in bulk direct. This business peaked in the 1970s when the business employed almost 400 staff at its two factories. As the civilian market became saturated, highly competitive and subject to increasing import competition, the civilian business started a long decline and the Calne factory was closed in 1985.

New specialist materials started to come onto the market during the late 1960s and early 1970s including the first Nomex fabrics from DuPont which allowed the development and introduction of new specialised fire clothing to replace the woollen fire tunic (the T9B) which had been in use, and remained largely unchanged, since the end of the 19th century.



The T63 was introduced as the forerunner of the modern fire suit and incorporated a serge material with a fire retardant finish. There was, at this time, no national standard for firefighter clothing but matters started to change slowly. Pat Hill became a pioneer during the 1970s when his approaches to the London Fire Brigade and the Home Office led to the beginnings of a long period of product development. First came the A19 Home Office specification which was a Nomex outershell short tunic with yellow PVC wet legs. This was followed by the A26 Home Office specification which was the forerunner of the first bunker style fire coat which drew heavily on Bristol's fire garment design at the time.



Eventually, the first European Standard for firefighter protective clothing was introduced in 1995. The working party, on which Bristol's technical staff were represented, started work in 1992 and EN469:1995 became the first standard to cover all countries in the European Union.

Until the early 1990s Bristol Uniforms and Wathen Gardiner traded alongside one another. Wathen Gardiner continued to supply fashion trousers to retailers (including ASDA for a time), public sector uniforms and station wear. Bristol Uniforms, as it had been doing since the early 1960s, concentrated on firefighter protective clothing.



The late 20th century

Ian Hill took over as MD in 1989 when his father, now 74, took a more part-time involvement in the business. Ian had been running the fashion trousers side of the business since 1981. Pat Hill (right) briefly took back control of the company in 1998 to oversee the sale of the business which now forms part of the international BTQ Group, whose major shareholder is Alan Dorrell. Bristol's sister companies include Bristol Fire Apparel, Topps Safety Apparel, Quaker Safety Products and Pro-Tuff in the USA. Peter Warr became its chairman.



The 21st century – the first decade: a time of major change and a new chapter in the company's history (2000-2009)

2001 saw the appointment of Roger Startin and Ian Mitchell as joint managing directors of the company.



In common with most aspects of business, the last few years have seen even more rapid changes and developments than the closing decades of the 20th century.

For Bristol Uniforms the past few years have been a time of considerable change in fabric technology which have, in turn, led to rapid developments in firefighter clothing design. These have run hand in hand, and alongside, changes in international standards for PPE.

Bristol have been at the forefront of two major developments which are now setting the pace for further changes to the way in which firefighter clothing designs are evolving and the means by which the lifetime integrity of PPE is assured for the personal safety of the wearer.



The first of these developments draws heavily on the strides made by the fibre manufacturers – in particular Du Pont Nemours, PBI Performance Products and Kermel – whose high performance products have made the design of lighter weight fabrics a reality. Combined with high performance moisture barriers developed by W L Gore, these innovative components have made for a lighter, more flexible solution without compromising the resistance to fire, heat and water of the made-up garments. The ground breaking human physiology trials, conducted in 2003 on behalf of the company to determine the impact of different designs on heat stress, supported the introduction of a new generation of lightweight PPE in the form of the Ergotech™ and Ergotech Action™ ranges which have ushered in a new era of firefighter clothing design.

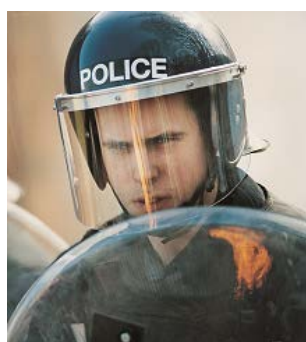


In another move to help the municipal fire & rescue services, as well as industrial firefighters, to meet their obligations towards employees under various health & safety legislation, an integrated managed care service was launched in 2000 under a new division of the company, Bristol Care™. This computerised system of recording and tracking individual items of personal protective equipment gives employers access to a fully featured service which provides for the inspection, washing, repair and decontamination of PPE as well as a condition coding programme to assist their asset management.

Since the London bombings in July 2005 the UK's emergency services have seen major changes in the way their response capabilities to major incidents have been improved through greater collaborative working. The term 'multi agency' has become more commonplace as the police, firefighters and ambulance services have seen parts of their emergency response teams brought under greater co-ordinated control at times of major incidents and natural disasters. This was seen clearly during the major flooding in 2007.

These developments have brought with them the need for all frontline emergency services personnel to be suitably protected when responding to major events and, in particular, to search and rescue missions associated with major industrial accidents, terrorist attacks and natural disasters.

Since 2005, these and other developments in the market for personal protective clothing across the emergency services have provided the company with a springboard from which to launch and pursue a new business strategy using its technical and manufacturing skills and experience to open up new opportunities in the police and ambulance markets.



In 2006, Bristol entered the police PPE market by extending its managed care services to provide lifetime maintenance for public order protective clothing and equipment – marking the first time Bristol Uniforms has diversified from its core fire market for almost 40 years.

In 2007, Bristol's ambitions to become fully involved in the police market were realised with the launch of a comprehensive range of police public order PPE. The combination of PPE manufacture and managed care provision gave the company a unique position as it became the first supplier of a fully integrated PPE supply and care offering – another first for a company which has been a market leader for over 200 years.



2007 also saw the conclusion to a four year programme by the UK government to introduce a scheme aimed at bringing greater conformity amongst the UK's fire & rescue services under the auspices of Firebuy. The Integrated Clothing Project (ICP) offered UK and European companies the opportunity to bid for a contract to become the lead supplier of PPE for a 15 year period up to 2022. This competitive tendering process, which involved the UK's leading manufacturers, looked at every aspect of PPE supply from design and manufacture to the financial and commercial stability and capability of the tendering companies. It also evaluated the bidders' managed service provision. An announcement in April identified Bristol as the Preferred Bidder, opening up new opportunities to expand its share of the UK fire and rescue market not only in PPE but for station wear, ceremonial uniforms and managed services.

In 2008, Bristol entered the ambulance market for the first time by designing new technical rescue PPE to protect ambulance crews required to work in 'hot zones' alongside firefighters and the police in combined operations. Since then, the establishment of HART (Hazardous Area Response Teams) sections across most ambulance trust areas of the country has seen the company become the major supplier using its specialist design capabilities and manufacturing strengths to meet the bespoke needs of this new market.



Abroad, similarly rapid change has seen the company's presence in overseas markets expand considerably as its brand has become firmly established in international markets across the world as synonymous with innovative, world class specialist protective clothing. Underpinned by its network of distributors, which has grown from 50 to 70 since 2005, Bristol has expanded its presence as a PPE supplier into an additional 20 countries in the last five years and now meets the protective clothing needs of firefighters in 110 countries across five continents.

2009 saw the opening of the company's new international distribution centre at Yate (right), to the north of the city and with easy access to the motorway system, which provided an additional 2000m² of storage space. The entire distribution facility was relocated to the Stover Road site, allowing the expansion of both the materials warehouse and offices at Wathen Street Head Office to be expanded.



Only recently Bristol has rekindled its long history with Australia. 150 years after its successful entry into the Australian market with woollen clothing, the appointment of a new distributor there has reopened the market. Early success has resulted in the company becoming the largest supplier of firefighter PPE to the country's airports. Elsewhere the company has become a major supplier to a number of Gulf States with structural firefighter clothing for their civil defence forces, has considerably expanded its presence in Eastern Europe as new members have joined the European Union and has increased its influence along the Pacific Rim.

The 21st century – the second decade: a time of major change and a new chapter in the company's history

Senior management milestones

Pat Hill died late in 2010, aged 95.



Alan Dorrell became chairman on the retirement of Peter Warr (right) at the end of 2010.



2012, a landmark year for the senior management of the company, was celebrated with joint managing directors Ian Mitchell and Roger Startin marking ten years together at the helm.

Key milestones during this period included;

- An expansion of the company's facilities.
- The opening of a new service centre (right) in early 2010 at Rainham, Greater London.
- Enlarged and refurbished offices at Staple Hill and the installation of new IT systems.
- The start of an eight year PPE contract with London Fire Brigade which saw the deployment of new kit for almost 6000 firefighters.
- The deployment new head-to-toe PPE for West Midlands FRS involving the supply of 1800 sets of kit.
- An all-new website.
- Celebrating 10 years of managed services.



A range of new products comes to market

The innovative XFlex™ design platform was introduced on which a number of new products are based and which, during the two years 2010 and 2011, included;

- **XFlex™** structural range (right) with a unique thermal lining, ECO-dry™, made exclusively for Bristol by A W Hainsworth.
- **RescueFlex™** - a new generation of USAR PPE.
- **HART** – a new generation of Bristol’s protective clothing designed for ambulance crews operating in hot zones and hazardous areas.
- **Fleet Suit** – Bristol’s new marine firefighting PPE developed to meet the new European MarED directive and the new performance standard, EN 469:2005.
- Bristol became an approved supplier to the UK’s Department of Health. The company become the dominant supplier of HART kit across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.
 - Further growth took place in the use of its specially designed technical rescue PPE for air ambulance crews.
 - Bristol’s innovative **motorcycle suit** meets both BS EN13595-1:2002 Level 2 and BS EN 469: 2005 Level 2.



More recently, the revised **NFPA1971:2013 standard** saw the introduction of two new NFPA ensemble options based on the Ergotech™ and XFlex™ designs. Other new products introduced during the year included the all-new, EN361 compliant, **integrated safety harness** (right) and a lighter weight **firefighter motorcycle suit** (left) meeting EN469:2005 Level 1 became part of the structural firefighting range of PPE at the end of the 2013.



Progress in the UK and abroad

Abroad, the new momentum gained in the Australian market, through winning the contract to supply Air Services Australia (right) with their ARFF PPE requirements in 2010 to equip around 1400 firefighters at 21 of Australia’s largest airports, has continued. In active partnership with our distributor, PAC Fire, we achieved another major success in securing a PPE contract to supply the Australian Defence Force with an initial delivery of 1200 sets of kit for the protection of the firefighters in their Army, Navy and Air Force.



We continued our well-established support for leading international fire and emergency services **exhibitions**. Our **international distributor network** was further expanded as we continued to open up new export markets. Growth in our **overseas business** included new contracts in New Zealand, Australia, the Gulf States, Scandinavia and Caribbean.

In the UK new PPE contracts helped drive **business growth**. Notable examples included Greater Manchester FRS, West Midlands FRS, Channel Islands fire services and Avon FRS. New airport customers included Gatwick, Prestwick and further growth at Bristol Airport.



The mid-term process of reviewing the range of PPE for the Integrated Clothing Project - the **CPCC Technology Refresh** got underway

Technical process developments saw a new wet cleaning process introduced into our managed services programme.

In the wider **Emergency Services sector**, significant further **developments** included the launch of new technical rescue flying suits for air ambulance crews (left).

In-house manufacture expands into new products

Security of supply saw the development of an extension of in-house design and manufacture. Bristol expanded its range of firefighter PPE products it now manufactures itself. During 2012 a new range of fire hoods was introduced to enhance further head-to-toe PPE compatibility.



2014



The year was notable for the improvement in the UK's economy and signs that some major world markets had begun to show growth and new opportunities for our overseas business. We continued to build on the well-established external collaborative research and development programmes with our key fibre and fabric suppliers including DuPont Nomex, PBI Performance Products, Hainsworth and W L Gore. Our own new product development activity continued to provide a number of new garment concepts, as well as innovative products, both of which have helped us win significant new contracts in both the UK and export fire markets in the face of stiff international competition.

Our people

The past year has underlined the stability and commitment of the whole team at Bristol as staff in sales, design and technical all recorded almost 20 years of service within their respective teams.

During the year, three senior managers were appointed directors in recognition of their contribution to the growth and development of the business in recent years. Philip Tasker is now UK Sales Director, Edward Shepherd, Service Operations Director, and David Thompson, Finance Director.



Philip Tasker



Edward Shepherd



David Thompson

International Distributor Conference



We held our 9th Conference in June which attracted over 40 delegates from 28 countries and was widely agreed to have been the most successful conference to date. Given the pace of new product development, the main focus of the three day event was, unsurprisingly, centred on technical innovation, new products and performance standards and the key part these play in maintaining our competitive edge in world markets. The value of our biennial conferences is clearly recognised by major suppliers who look to share in our success. A W Hainsworth, W L Gore and PBI Performance Products were among the sponsors of the event and contributed to the various technical sessions held as part of the ongoing training aspect of the conference.

CPCC Technological Refresh

2014 marked the mid-point of the comprehensive two year CPCC Technological Refresh programme which, itself, marks the halfway point of this 15 year firefighter clothing contract which Bristol secured as part of the UK Government's National Procurement Strategy back in 2007. Originally named the Integrated Clothing Project (ICP), the procurement scheme has been renamed and is now the Central PPE and Clothing Contract (CPCC), available for use by all fire and rescue services in England and Wales.



Following the extensive technical assessment of alternative new PPE garments, to be added to the CPCC range from late 2015, selected FRS provided firefighters to be part of a comprehensive garment trials programme which took place in the UK and Cyprus during the late spring and summer. This was followed by a six month garment wearer trial involving all CPCC Users which concluded at the end of the year.

The final evaluation of the complete refresh programme will identify the new ranges of structural, wildland and technical rescue PPE which will be added to the existing protective clothing ranges. The new garments will be available towards the end of 2015.

Product innovation

The fruits of our new product development programme came in the form of a combination of additional styles of PPE for firefighters and air ambulance crews as well as the introduction of our first own-design and manufactured fire gloves.

Having listened closely to our customers discussing with us how they see their future PPE needs, it became apparent that, for some, the proliferation of garments to separately meet the needs of structural and wildland firefighting, as well as technical rescue, was placing particular pressures on their procurement budgets. It was also making their wardrobe management unnecessarily complex.



Our design team has worked hard to come up with a solution using a layered approach to allow different levels of protection to be achieved using a total of just three garments instead of the four or more which might otherwise be needed to fulfil the standards requirements of all three operational activities. Our innovative XFlex™ Layered Garment was introduced in the autumn of 2015, using two coats and one trouser in different combinations to meet EN469:2005 Levels 1 and 2, the Wildland Standard EN15614:2007 and Hi-Visibility Standard EN20471:2013.

The introduction of a range of fire gloves, designed by Bristol, marks another major milestone in the development of our product strategy. This is aimed at improving PPE supply security by reducing reliance on external suppliers where we believe we can design and manufacture better products in-house. The first of what will be a range of three different styles was introduced in July. The complete range will be available in 2015.



Business expansion



Two major new contracts were the highlight of our new business development activity in the UK. The signing of a five year lease agreement with Birmingham International Airport saw the airport's 64 firefighters equipped with new head-to-toe protective clothing which included our latest XFlex™ structural fire kit (left).

Also in the summer, Greater Manchester Fire & Rescue, who had been closely involved in the development of the new XFlex™ Layered Garment, opted to select this innovative PPE in a contract for 3200 sets of the garments. Securing this business was a major success for the Company which will see their firefighters wearing the new kit from early 2015.

Sponsorship

Leading sector magazine, *Fire*, inaugurated the *Excellence in Fire and Emergency Awards* in 2015 which is aimed at publicly recognising and celebrating innovative working practices, initiatives, partnerships and technology in the fire and emergency services. Invited to participate in the event, Bristol sponsored the Project of the Year award which was won by Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service for its Progression Pathway project.



Engaging with the Prince's Trust and other volunteering schemes, GMFRS became a trailblazer by launching a traineeship scheme in partnership with the National Apprenticeship Service, Skills for Fire and Rescue and learning providers. The awards were made at a lunch at London's Caledonian Club in October and Roger was on hand to make the award to GMFRS.

Our mission

Bristol Uniforms firmly believes in the power of innovation to drive growth which continues to be at the heart of the successful expansion achieved in recent years and marked by a number of notable achievements. These have served to reinforce our position as one of the world's leading PPE manufacturers for the emergency services. It is a position which we will continue to consolidate, robustly defend and is backed by a reputation we are proud to protect. Our resilience through challenging times has given customers and prospects alike the confidence to turn to us as a reliable and trustworthy supplier.